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18 March 1954

NSC BRIEFING

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CONDITIONS AT DIEN BIEN PHU

- I. French dug in on center dusty plain, surrounded by hills 1,000 to 4,000 feet high.
 - A. Mixed nature of garrison includes French, Foreign Legion, African, Vietnamese and tribal troops.
 - B. Artillery -- 155's, 105's, 75's -- concentrated in center positions.
 - C. Ground haze covering targets, limiting French air and ground observation of enemy positions.
- II. Viet Minh attacks come in suicidal waves.
 - A. In actions to this date, French have counted several thousand bodies hanging from barbed wire. French claim these are obstructing their fire.
 - B. Viet Minh troops employing "living bomb" tactic, strapping explosives to "death volunteers" who breach barbed wire.
 - C. Display high morale; Gen. Giap reportedly sent personal message unit commanders stressing vital importance battle to final victory.
- III. Enemy artillery fire very effective.
 - A. Has temporarily knocked out both airstrips.
 - B. Has knocked out some French guns and crews, which are now being replaced.

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- C. Their artillery, mortar fire very effective; shows thorough training all phases fire methods.
 - D. Possibility ChiCom ^{advisers}/present view ability concentrate fire crushing effect without prior experience massed guns.
 - E. VM command well-informed layout French defenses. This also accounts accurate fire and has enabled commandos infiltrate, knock-out several French artillery posts.
- IV. Admitted French losses total about two battalions.
- A. French struggling to repair airstrips, where casualties now awaiting evacuation by helicopter.
- V. Troop morale reportedly low. Intensity of enemy artillery barrage, heaviest of war, has serious unnerving effect.
- A. Thai units proving unreliable; large numbers deserting or breaking off during attacks.
- VI. French capable of supplying garrison by airdrop for 60 days, without parachute recovery.
- A. Enemy estimated to have supplies in area for similar period.
 - B. Enemy antiaircraft fire worrying French.
 - 1. To date, eight planes destroyed, mostly on ground but one in air by 37mm fire.
 - 2. French believe perhaps six 37mm weapons in area; enemy rely primarily on 12.7 AA machinegun.

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VII. Navarre says he'll hold Dien Bien Phu at all costs.

- A. His staff appalled enemy effectiveness and shocked that first phase of attack so very bad for French forces.
- B. Will commit all parachute battalions -- total of six available -- if necessary.
- C. Most observers think battle touch and go but advantage slightly on French side.
- D. French must step up air operations, lift sagging morale.

VIII. Although Hanoi consulate does not anticipate necessity of general evacuation of Tonkin, plans are in hand to effect this if situation in north generally deteriorates.

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